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MANHUNT

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There were a couple of old killings on the books. Maybe, the cops thought, they could pin them on Pittman.

BY JACK RITCHIE

Interrogation

WHEN Pete and I reported in and signed the book, Sergeant Herrick filled us in.

"Her husband and his brother-in-law set up an ambush and had a lot of fun," he said. "They set the bait by hanging a lot of the pink stuff on the line and then took up a stand behind the ash-box. When this collector slid over the fence around midnight and began popping the clothes pins,

they were waiting. The guy's unbroken, but he's hurting and lucky to be alive."

Herrick looked at the wall clock and yawned. "Like always, the creep says he can't remember a thing. His mind went blank and all that stuff."

Pete checked the bulletin board and came back to the desk. "We got any reading material on him?"

"A regular customer. Three times for indecent exposure and once he was caught under a window enjoying a free show. He got a working over for that one too. You'd think he'd learn."

I lit a cigarette and leafed through the charge papers.

"He's got a place near the river and we went over it," Herrick said. "It was loaded with silk, pictures, and symphony records."

"Where have you got the poor misunderstood soul?" Pete asked.

"Upstairs in 603 with Nelson." Herrick picked up two heavy folders from his desk and handed them to me. "Try him on the Dugan thing. We went over it with him the last time he was here, but maybe you're more persuasive. And the other one's the Harris collection. I know it's pretty dusty, but you never can tell. I'll give you a cigar if you can hang it on him."

Pete and I went down the corridor and took the elevator to the sixth floor.

"It's funny what some guys do for a hobby," Pete said. "Now me, I like to watch ice cubes melt."

We walked into 603. Nelson was sitting on the wooden table looking at the stack of snapshots. He got to his feet. "After the first fifty, it gets monotonous."

He thumbed toward the corner. "Every greasy inch of him is yours. I'm going outside to wonder about these things for a while."

The man was seated on a straight-back chair, his legs drawn up and he hugged his knees. His face was puffed and torn from the beating and the edges of the bandages around his head were dark with the oil of his hair. He kept his eyes on the floor and was hoping he wouldn't be touched.

I pulled up a chair and sat down, adjusting my trousers to protect the creases. "Talk to us," I said. "And start with your name."

He bit his lips and kept his eyes focused on the floor.

"He's shy," Pete said. "I think I'll roll up my sleeves."

"My name is Ralph Pittman," he said quickly. "I live at 826 South Travis."

"Tell us all about it," I said. "We're the kind who like to listen."

"I don't remember anything," Pittman said.

"You see, Pete," I said. "He doesn't remember anything. I think we ought to leave him go."

"I blacked out," Pittman said.

Pete went to the cardboard box on the table and fished among the lingerie. He held up a pair of briefs. "Hey," he said. "Monogrammed."

I saw these advertised in the papers a while back." He tossed them toward Pittman and they landed on his knees.

Pittman's eyes watched them as they glided down his legs and flowed to the floor.

"Just between the three of us, Pittman, why the hell do you collect these things?" Pete asked.

"I don't know," Pittman said.

Pete pawed through more of the stuff.

I looked Pittman over before I opened the Dugan file. The collar of his shirt was soiled and there were moons of dirt under his fingernails.

Pittman's eyes went to the green folder. "You always ask me about those things," he said. "I never had anything to do with them."

"I believe you," I said. "But let's go around again. Marion Dugan. On October 21st of last year she was found in an empty lot. She was twelve years old."

"I didn't have anything to do with it," Pittman said. "You cops tried to pin it on me the last time too, but there was nothing to it."

"When was that?" I asked.

He looked at the floor. "In January."

"What were you here for then?" I asked.

He didn't want to talk about it, but I waited patiently.

"For that window stuff," he said finally. "I was just passing by, that's all. I didn't even look."

"Man! How this stuff slithers," Pete said, still bending over the box.

Pittman licked his lips and looked away.

I picked up the other folder and looked at it. "Edna Harris," I said. "She was eleven. Can you help us a little bit on that?"

Pete left the box and began going through the pictures. He looked up. "Take any of these yourself, Pittman?"

"No," Pittman said. "I bought them. I don't know who from. Just some guys I met on the street." He turned back to me. "I don't know a thing about the Harris girl either."

Pete came over with one of the snapshots. "Here's one I'd like to meet," he said.

I glanced at it. "Looks a little hippy to me."

"That's how you want them, Harry," Pete said. He showed the picture to Pittman. "She isn't too hippy, is she?"

Pittman turned his face away, but Pete shoved the picture under his nose. "Is this one of your favorites?" he asked. "Tell me what you think about when you look at her?"

"What's it like to talk to a psychiatrist, Pittman?" I asked. "I'm real curious about that."

"I'm as sane as you are," Pittman said. "A lot saner."

"He's not crazy, Harry," Pete said. "He's emotionally disturbed."

"How about that, Pittman?" I

asked. "Are you emotionally disturbed?"

"I'm a lot better off than you are," Pittman said.

I moved my chair a couple of inches away from him. "Don't you ever take a bath, Pittman? I can smell you from here."

"He likes it that way," Pete said. "He likes to smell. It makes him feel comfortable and gives him a sense of security. Didn't you know that, Harry?"

"You're dirty, Pittman," I said. "Filthy dirty and you stink."

"Don't say that," Pittman's voice rose.

"You're greasy," Pete said. "Can't you feel the greasiness on your neck? Doesn't your skin stick when you move your head?"

"You're oily and you stink," I said.

"I don't stink," Pittman yelled, rising to his feet.

"Pete," I said quietly. "I think you're disturbing him."

"I didn't mean to do that, Harry," Pete said.

We waited until Pittman was seated again. He was breathing hard and his face was mottled with color.

"Say," Pete said. "Did you know that Pittman here has a collection of symphony records? Must be a couple of hundred."

"I like good music myself," I said.

"Tell us what you think about when you listen to music, Pittman?" Pete asked.

"Don't ask him, Pete," I said. "He'll spoil my appreciation of good music if he tells us."

"I wonder if they're all symphony records," Pete said. "You know some of those things have fake labels. I heard a couple the other day that were pretty hot stuff."

"I never thought of that," I said. "Let's bring them to headquarters and play them."

"Those are my records," Pittman said. "Leave them alone."

"We just want to borrow them, Pittman," I said. "I don't think we'll break any."

Pittman sat up straight in his chair. "Leave them alone. They're just music."

"Now don't be that way," Pete said. "You must have hundreds of them. You won't miss a few."

The muscles in Pittman's face began twitching.

"I'll bet there are some good ones in your collection," I said. "Have you got the one about the two women and the doctor?"

Pittman leaped to his feet. "I'll kill you if you touch those records!"

I took out my pack of cigarettes and offered one to Pete.

"I really ought to cut down on smoking," he said, taking one.

"Me too," I said. "I wake up every morning with a cough."

"Why don't you sit down, Pittman," Pete said softly.

Pittman sat down.

Pete looked at the pair of briefs still at Pittman's feet. "You better

pick those up before you step on them," he said.

Pittman picked them up and held them out for Pete.

"You can hold them for a while," Pete said. "I wouldn't know what to do with them."

"What kind of material is that, Pittman?" I asked. "Looks like silk to me."

"I don't know," Pittman said, not looking at the briefs.

"I don't think they make those things out of silk any more, Harry," Pete said. "Come over here and feel it."

I stood up and moved over to Pittman. His head shrank almost into his shoulders as I reached forward and took some of the material between my thumb and forefinger. "I can't tell, Pete," I said. "This could be nylon."

Pete fingered the briefs. "I don't know, Harry. I think nylon is used for stockings mostly. This could be rayon."

"You ought to know, Pittman," I said. "Run this stuff between your fingers."

Pittman let go of the briefs and hid his fingers in his fists.

"I think the lace does something for these things," I said. "If you know what I mean."

"I sure do," Pete said. "Come now, Pittman. You must know what kind of material this is when you take it off the lines."

"It's always dark, Pete," I said. "And he doesn't remember."

"Here," Pete said. "Let me put this in your hands and you can feel it, Pittman."

The chair tipped over as Pittman jumped to his feet. "All right," he shouted. His chest heaved as he breathed. "I stole those things off the line. What more do you want?"

"What things?" Pete asked with interest.

"Panties," I said. "Don't embarrass him, Pete."

"Stop it!" Pittman shrieked.

Pete went over to the ash tray and carefully tapped some ash into it. "Pick up the chair, Pittman," he said. "That's city property."

"Sure," I said. "Sit down and relax, Pittman. There's no point to getting excited."

Pittman righted the chair and sat down. Thin beads of sweat made claw marks from his temples to his shirt collar. He took out a handkerchief and smeared at his neck.

"Look at the handkerchief now, Pittman," I said. "You'll see that I was right. That's dirt. Filthy, greasy dirt."

His eyes went to the handkerchief for a second and then he stuffed it back into his pocket.

Pete paged through the Dugan folder. "I wonder what type of a man would do that to a twelve-year-old kid?"

"You couldn't call him a man, could you, Pete?"

"I'll bet he's something filthy," Pete said.

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Inside and out," Pete said. "The kind of a guy who never takes a bath. Real dirty and sticky."

"Are you sure you're not sticky, Pittman?" I asked. "Doesn't the sweat trickling under your shirt and down your body bother you?"

"Leave me alone," Pittman said, his voice breaking.

"You never can tell about people, though, Pete," I said. "Maybe deep inside of him this degenerate bastard's got a sensitive soul and likes good music. The world just doesn't understand him."

"You may be right," Pete said. "The world's a cruel place for somebody who's sensitive."

"I think he's the kind of a man who's afraid of women," I said. "That's why he picks on kids."

"I never thought of it that way," Pete said. "How are you with women, Pittman?"

"Have you ever seen one with that look in her eye?" I asked. "You must know what I mean."

"Or have her come and whisper evil things in your ear?" Pete asked.

Pittman put his hands over his face and bent his head to his knees.

"On the other hand," Pete said. "I'll bet Pittman doesn't know a thing about women. If it's a man, Harry, would you still call him a virgin?"

"I think so," I said. "Or is it eunuch?"

"That's something else, Harry. But maybe he's got a complex. You know what that is, don't you?"

Pittman leaped to his feet again and his eyes were wild. He stood there with his body stiff and his face contorted. After about ten seconds he collapsed back into the chair and began sobbing softly.

I lit a new cigarette and tossed one to Pete. "Open a window, Pete," I said. "Let's get some clean air in here."

Pete went to the window and pulled it up as far as it would go. He leaned out and looked down. After a while he pulled his head back in. "That's a long way to drop," he said.

"Six stories, Pete," I said. "Wonder what a man would look like if he fell that far."

"Depends on how he lands," Pete said. "But he sure would be messed all over." He walked away from the window. "I've been wondering whether you ever thought of a telescope, Pittman?"

"How do you mean, Pete?" I asked.

"You can see a lot of things with a telescope," Pete said. "Especially at night and if you look from a high place."

"That's right," I said. "A lot of people are careless about shades."

"It's a lot safer than window peeping too," Pete said. "What do you think, Pittman?"

Pittman still had his hands over his face and his breath made a noise through his fingers.

"I don't believe he knows exactly what you mean," I said.

"Leave me alone," Pittman moaned.

"I think he's a little confused now," Pete said. "If we showed him, he'd understand a lot better."

Pete took his left arm and I took his right. Pittman tried to shrink away and his mouth moved soundlessly as we half-carried him to the open window. His eyes looked down the six floors to the hard pavement below and they filled with horror.

"Look at all those windows across there," Pete said. "You ought to be able to see dozens of things every night."

"It makes me shiver to look down there," I said. "How long do you think it would take to fall, Pete?"

"Just a couple of seconds," he said. "But it would be a long time, hell, because you know what's waiting for you."

Pete flipped his cigarette butt out of the window and Pittman watched with terrible fear as it dropped.

"You know, Harry," Pete said. "I think the man is basically a coward."

"Who are you talking about, Pete? You mean Pittman?"

"I was thinking particularly of the killer of the Dugan girl, Harry."

Pittman's knuckles were white as his hands gripped the window sill.

"He would have to be a coward," I said. "A dirty, filthy little coward. Be careful, Pittman. We wouldn't want you to slip."

"I should say not," Pete said. "Remember the last time, Harry?"

Took us hours of paper work to explain it."

"It was an accident, Pete. You know that."

"Sure, Harry. That's the way I always think of it."

Pete and I both leaned forward until Pittman's body was out of the window from the waist up. His toes scratched frantically for the floor and he made small animal noises as he struggled.

Pete and I shoved him out a little further and held him there. After about a minute, Pete and I looked at each other and Pete shrugged his shoulders.

We hauled Pittman back into the room and let go of him. He sank to the floor and crawled to a corner. He crouched there, holding his knees tight to his face, his eyes wide but not seeing anything.

I picked up the two green folders from the table and Pete and I left.

Nelson was outside the door leaning against the wall. "A little noisy in there," he said.

"Don't know what you mean," Pete said. "Take good care of him. I think he needs a glass of water."

Pete and I took the elevator down and put the folders on Herrick's desk.

"Nothing doing," I said.

Pete and I walked down to the basement coffee shop. "You meet some queer ones," Pete said.

"I know what you mean," I said. "They always leave a bad taste in your mouth."